

# Latin American Literature in the United States

Retrospect and Prospect

Sturgis E. Leavitt

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Latin America has long had close commercial relations with the countries of Western Europe, and in the case of France and Spain it has also had intellectual and cultural contacts of a high order, but none of the European countries has manifested as much interest in its literature as has the United States. In fact, though our country has been looked upon in many quarters as a materialistic ogre, the number of articles and books on Latin American literature published in the United States probably exceeds the output of England, Germany, France, and Spain, together. Mere numbers have little value, to be sure, but the quality of the North American writings ranks favorably with those of other countries. When the United States is again accused of unadulterated commercialism, perhaps some enterprising scholar will lift a few figures out of his sleeve and show, as a writer from Latin America once remarked of Waldo Frank, that “No son todos [los norteamericanos] petroleros.”

The interest of the United States in Latin America dates back to the early nineteenth century with a translation (1827), and possibly two, by William Cullen Bryant from the Cuban poet Jose Maria Heredia, cousin of the more famous French poet of the same name. Scattered translations continued through the century, the most notable of which were renderings (1845 and later) of the best poems of the Cuban mulatto poet “Placido,” who seems to have attracted particular attention from the abolitionists; a translation (1868) of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento’s historical and sociological *Facundo*, now a collector’s item which deserves reprinting with notes on the talented translator, Mrs. Horace Mann; and one (1890) of the Colombian Jorge Isaac’s idyllic novel *Maria*, known and loved all over Spanish America. The visits of the great Argentine statesman Sarmiento in the middle of the century aroused more than passing curiosity on the part of scholars like George Ticknor and Longfellow, but these men were unable to discover very much about the literatures of the countries to the south, although they did their best to find out. Toward the end of the century the versatile and now almost legendary scholar M. M. Ramsay wrote (1897) for Warner’s “Library of the World’s Best Literature” a survey of Latin American literature which stands as high achievement for its time.

After the Spanish-American War translations of poetry began fairly early (1908) with the work of Alice Blackwell, and many of her poems were published later in book form (*Some Spanish American Poets*, Appleton, 1929; second printing, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1937). The flood of textbooks that was later to reach a high mark also began in the first decade of the century, as did translations of prose fiction. And as early as 1910 the idea of a history in English of Spanish American literature was launched by Bishop Charles Warren Currier (*Bulletin of the Pan American Union*, but this project was never carried out. Articles in encyclopedias were fairly numerous and of these the most important was J. D. M. Ford’s “Spanish American Literature” (Catholic Encyclopedia, 1912).

Systematic study of Spanish American literature really began in the United States with Alfred Coester’s *Literary History of Spanish America* (Macmillan, 1916), the first attempt anywhere to present under one cover the literatures of the many Spanish

American countries. This book was severely reviewed by a professor of history, William R. Shepherd (*Romanic Review*, 1917), but none the less it had a wide circulation and inspired many to become enthusiasts and active workers. A second edition appeared in 1928 and was severely reviewed by the lamented Pastoriza Flores. Coester's book was translated into Spanish in 1929.

As early as 1914 the talented Isaac Goldberg had appeared in the columns of the *Boston Transcript* as a penetrating literary critic of Spanish American literature, and the best of his studies were revised and published in book form in *Studies in Spanish American Literature* (Brentano's, 1920, later translated into Spanish by R. Cansinos-Assens). Among other scholars who made contributions during the period 1910–1920 were E. C. Hills and G. W. Umphrey.

The year 1920 was full of activity, with numerous biographical and critical articles, translations of both prose and poetry, and textbooks. From then on production continued unabated. Important contributions to scholarship in 1922 were Isaac Goldberg's *Brazilian Literature* (Knopf); S. E. Leavitt's "Chilean Literature, a Bibliography" (*Hispanic American Historical Review*); and Bernard Moses' *Spanish Colonial Literature in South America* (Hispanic Society). For 1923, H. A. Holmes's doctoral dissertation on Martin Fierro (Columbia University) deserves mention as the first in the field of Latin American literature. For 1924, we have Coester's *Anthology of the Modernist a Movement* (Ginn and Co.) and S. E. Leavitt's *Argentine Literature, a Bibliography* (University of North Carolina Press); for 1925, E. K. Mapes's *Uninfluence française dans Voeuvre de Ruben Dario* (The Sorbonne) and Federico de Onís' "El *Martin Fierro* y la poesía tradicional (*Homenaje a Menéndez Pidal*); for 1926, Bernard Moses' *The Intellectual Background of the Revolution in South America* (Hispanic Society); for 1927 and later years, J. D. FitzGerald's "Spanish American Literatures" (*International Yearbook*); and for 1929, I. A. Leonard's *Sigüenza y Gongora* (University of California Publications in History) and his *Ensayo bibliográfico de Sigüenza y Gongora* (Mexico, Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores). During this whole decade the magazine *Hispania*, under the editorship of Alfred Coester, carried forward the good cause, as did the short lived but extremely valuable *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* (1928–1929), edited by Federico de Onís.

The next ten years saw the publication of a series of bibliographies compiled by the Harvard Council on Hispano-American Studies and published by the Harvard University Press. This council, directed by J. D. M. Ford and composed of A. Coester, H. G. Doyle, S. E. Leavitt, Guillermo Rivera, A. Torres-Rioseco, S. M. Waxman, and A. F. Whittam, published tentative bibliographies of all the Latin American countries as well as special bibliographies such as S. E. Leavitt's *Hispano-American Literature in the United States* (continued in University of North Carolina Press, and in *Hispania*) and H. G. Doyle's *Bibliography of Ruben Dario* (1935), and a monograph by A. Torres-Rioseco on Ruben Dario (1931). The *Revista Hispánica Moderna*, begun in 1934 and still continuing under the editorship of Federico de Onís, carried articles, book reviews, and

a most useful bibliography. It also published E. K. Mapes's collection of the unedited works of Ruben Dario and Manuel Gutierrez Najera.

In 1936 there appeared under the auspices of the Latin American Committee of the American Council of Learned Societies the first volume of the *Handbook of Latin American Studies* (Harvard University Press). This compilation included bibliographical surveys of the preceding year written by I. A. Leonard and S. E. Leavitt (Spanish American Literature) and by Samuel Putnam (Brazilian Literature). These annual surveys still continue, with the help of Francisco Aguilera, who has assumed responsibility for poetry. In the same *Handbook* annual surveys of folklore have been contributed by R. S. Boggs, and studies on language by Leavitt O. Wright, Madaline W. Nichols, and Angel Rosenblatt. At the end of the decade the *Revista Iberoamericana* began publication (1939) under the auspices of the Instituto Internacional de Literatura Iberoamericana and edited by Carlos Garcia-Prada. This magazine, though largely informative or interpretive, has also carried numerous items of scholarly interest.

Other important contributions during the decade 1930-1940 include J. R. Spell's *Life and Works of ... Lizardi* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1931); S. E. Leavitt's "Bibliography of Theses Dealing with Hispano-American Language and Literature" (*Hispania*, 1935) and his yearly list of theses dealing with Latin American language and literature (*Hispania*, 1936 and later years); D. R. Ratcliff's *Venezuelan Prose Fiction* (Instituto de las Espahas, 1933), R. L. Grismer, J. E. Lepine and R. H. Olmsted's *Bibliography of Articles on Spanish [and Spanish American] Literature* (Minneapolis, Burgess Publishing Co., 1933); J. E. Englekirk's *Poe in Hispanic Literature* (Instituto de las Espahas, 1934); R. L. Grismer's *Bibliography of Articles and Essays on the Literatures of Spain and Spanish America* (Minneapolis, Perine Book Co., 1935); I. A. Leonard's Peralta Barnuevo, *Obras dramatical* (Santiago de Chile, 1937); J. R. Spell's "Mexican Periodicals of the Nineteenth Century" (*PMLA*, 1937), *Rousseau in the Spanish World before 1883* (University of Texas Press, 1938), and "Mexican periodicals of the Twentieth Century" (*PMLA*, 1939). The year 1939 saw many studies of value and interest, such as J. L. Read's *The Mexican Historical Novel* (Instituto de las Espahas), R. L. Grismer's *Reference Index to 12,000 Spanish American Authors* (New York, H. H. Wilson), and A. Torres-Rioseco's "La novela en la America Hispana" (*University of California Publications in Modern Philology*).

The decade which has just begun shows no lessening in activity. In 1940 John Van Horne published *Bernardo de Valbuena* (Guadalajara, Imp. Font) and A. Torres-Rioseco his *Novelistas contempordneos de America* (Santiago, Nascimento). Part of this volume appeared the next year as *Grandes novelistas de la America Hispana* (University of California Press) and the rest in 1943. In 1941 we have the beginning of Grismer's *New Bibliography of the Literatures of Spain and Spanish America* (Minneapolis, Perine Book Co.), still in process of publication (5 vols., Letters A-Carc); E. R. Moore's *Bibliografia de novelistas de la revolucion mexicana*. (Mexico, n. p.), Madaline W. Nichols' *Bibliographical Guide to Materials on American Spanish* (Harvard University Press); and the extremely useful *Outline History of Spanish American*

*Literature* (Crofts) by E. H. Hespelt, I. A. Leonard, J. T. Reid, J. E. Englekirk, and J. A. Crow (Second edition, 1942). In 1942 there was published C. K. Jones's monumental *Bibliography of Latin American Bibliographies* (Washington, Government Printing Office. First edition, Baltimore, 1922), and in 1943, A. Torres-Rioseco's *Epic of Latin American Literature* (Oxford Press), presenting in attractive style and with sound criticism the literatures of all the Latin American countries, including Brazil. In 1944 J. J. Arrom's *Historia de la literatura dramdtica cubana* (Yale University Press) threw abundant light on a neglected field, and J. R. Spell's *Contemporary Spanish American Fiction* (University of North Carolina Press) gave full information about the content of the most important Spanish American fiction. In spite of the war the good work is still being carried on.

If one reviews the whole field of North American contribution to the study of Spanish American literature, certain conclusions can be reached. For one thing, it can definitely be said that where once considerable confusion prevailed as to what figures were really important, the ground has now been cleared and a distinction between major and minor figures has been established. For another thing, Latin American literature is no longer a homeless waif or an Orphan Annie, but has been publicly recognized as a legitimate field for research. In support of this research reasonably good libraries are being built up in many parts of the country. The time is indeed ripe for a long run of serious studies, a considerable number of which have already appeared.

In the research already done, it is apparent that bibliography predominates. Indeed, it might even seem to some that there has been a superabundance of bibliography, and yet the practitioners of this three by five art will insist to their dying breath that this type of endeavor has its place in the world of scholarship. The present trend to exhaustive individual bibliographies is one of many hopeful signs, and such compilations should prove in time to be solid bases for extensive biographies. In other fields of research it is encouraging to note that some scholars are beginning to restrict their activities to special fields, as for example, I. A. Leonard to the book trade between Spain and the colonies, J. E. Englekirk to the influence of North American writers on Spanish America, and E. R. Moore to the Mexican novel.

Notwithstanding the wealth of studies in Latin American literature already published, much still remains to be done. In the first place, many fields have been only partially explored, as for example, the widespread *costumbrista* movement in Latin America, in which J. R. Spell has made a beginning with "The *costumbrista* Movement in Mexico"; the influence of North American literature upon Latin American literature (But see J. E. Englekirk's studies of Poe, Whitman, and Longfellow); European influences on Spanish America (But see Spell's *Rousseau in the Spanish World*, F. S. Shedd's "Florencio Sanchez' Debt to Eugene Brieux," Dorothy Kress's "El peso de la influencia francesa en la renovacdn de la prosa hispanoamericana" and Stuart Cuthbertson's "Scott's Influence on Jose Marmol's *El Cruzado*"). Studies of special types are needed, and we have one in Madaline Nichols's study of the *gaucho*. The drama of individual countries deserves systematic study (But see W. K. Jones's stud-

ies of Chile, the Rio de la Plata, and Paraguay; and J. J. Arrom's study of the Cuban theater). Yet to be made are many intensive investigations of individual authors like J. A. Crow's study of Horacio Quiroga, Carlos Garcia-Prada's study of J. A. Silva, and Otis H. Greene's penetrating analysis of the ideology of Manuel Galvez.

And there are other fields which have hardly been scratched, such as regional loyalties and their expression; official and unofficial cultural contacts between Spain and her former colonies; the persistence of Spanish tradition in Spanish America; the history of Latin American academies, and other literary organizations; North American travellers in Latin America; Latin American travellers in the United States; Latin American "colonies" in Paris; Spaniards in Latin America; Latin Americans in Spain; the history of literary magazines in Latin America; Russian influence on Latin American literature; and literary criticism, or the lack of it, in Latin America. With the present enthusiasm for Latin American contacts, however, and with the continued building up of materials for research, it seems abundantly clear that these topics, and many others, will be presented in due course of time.

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